

Epiphany: Opening Up Our Treasures

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[0 : 00] In Matthew chapter 2 and verse 11, we read these words, Then they, the wise men, opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh.

I suspect with many of you, I have a kind of unease about the way we celebrate Christmas. Just the idea of our shops being decorated from mid-November and then, of course, followed by the sales. Would make it seem, I think, if a Martian were to land on earth, that this is just one massive celebration of materialism, of things.

I look in my own family's homes, my grandchildren, and the absolute piles of presents under the Christmas tree, and I shudder a little bit.

I see children who are overexcited, and that's part of the joy of Christmas in a way, isn't it? Ripping into their presents, so carefully wrapped, but ultimately bored with much of what they've received unless it can be played on a screen.

[1 : 24] I admired the man on the radio chat show I heard about this year, who told us, and was slightly esconced, that his wife was very upset when she unwrapped her gift and found it was a dishcloth.

And then he said, actually, that was a joke, he said, and he presented her with a large box, which was beautifully wrapped.

We all thought this was going to have a nice ending, this story, until we discovered that in the big box there was a Hoover. I'm rather in favour of the Icelandic tradition at Christmas, where on Christmas Eve, a gift is exchanged, one gift, and it's usually a book, and it's given on Christmas Eve.

I know that would be hugely unpopular, and I'm not seriously suggesting it, but there is something about that that appeals to me.

The story of the wise men, the magi, as we call them, comes from a Greek word, magoi, which means wise, is a fascinating addition to the birth narratives.

[2 : 43] And only Matthew, in his Gospel, records this particular story. You will note that history and the Church have added details to that story, which actually don't exist in the original text.

I'm always vaguely amused by we three kings of Orient are. I mean, firstly, because we have no idea how many wise men there were. We assume there were three, because there were three gifts. But we haven't got a clue. There could have been a football team of wise men, as far as we know. And the likelihood that they came from the Orient is very unlikely.

Much more likely they came from the ancient Middle East, places like Iraq or Iran or Syria or places like that.

Even as far afield as Yemen, one scholar says. And of course, and this is where I take issue with the scholars, a good many modern scholars think that this event never took place at all.

[3 : 54] It's just a bit of made-up history. I have to say that I cannot believe that myself. As far as I'm concerned, whatever happened, three kings or a football team of kings coming from wherever, I believe in my head and in my heart this story to be a historical story.

And a number of things strike me about this story very immediately. Firstly, the courage of these wise men. Not only was making a long journey in those times a highly difficult and dangerous thing to do.

But then they had to confront Herod and his wily scheme to use the wise men to find the baby Jesus.

He lied through his teeth when he said, so I could go and worship him. What he really meant was, so I could go and kill him. He was threatened by anybody who might be a threat to his kingship.

The wise men decided that they would sidestep Herod and didn't go back to him and tell him where they found the Christ child.

[5 : 08] Their commitment strikes me. Many of us, I think, are too easily put off owning our own faith. And they were not put off from their journey to find the Christ child, to follow the star.

Their kindness, they brought gifts. And the consequences of them meeting the Christ child. It is thought by many scholars that these wise men were astrologers.

You know, the kind of people who write stuff in newspapers telling you what your future might look like. In other words, they might have been of extremely spurious theological background.

And yet, the consequence of coming and seeing a baby in a stable was that they bowed down and they worshipped him and they offered their gifts.

And that's what I want to talk to you about this morning. I want to talk to you about the offering of gifts. And before you put your hand in the pocket and hope that you left your wallet at home, I'm not talking about money.

[6 : 26] I want to talk to you about the reality that God has given to you, if you are a believer in Christ, charismata.

Where our word charismatic comes from. Charismata means gifts of grace. Every believer is given these gifts of grace.

It doesn't matter how young you are or how old you are. God has given you these gifts. And I need to say that at the beginning of this new year, the way that we're meant to offer our gifts will make a huge difference to your life as a Christian, will make a huge difference to the life of this church, and ultimately will make a huge difference to the wider community of Clevedon.

But before I talk to you directly about the gifts, just one or two more introductory comments, if I may. If you are a Christian, and I need to say that I never take it for granted that people sitting in front of me in a church building are truly Christian.

I never take that for granted. Funnily enough, as somebody who worked in the Church of England for 40-odd years, I've never taken it for granted in the Church of England that the people sitting in front of me are actually genuine believers.

[8 : 01] It's a bit like Billy Graham said once, that going to church doesn't make you a Christian any more than going into a garage makes you a car.

Because it's about a personal relationship with God. It's about knowing that your sins are forgiven. It's about being assured that when you die, you will not hit a brick wall, but you will go through a gateway into a state of existence called heaven.

A lot of confusion about what happens to Christians when they die. I dare say that confusion is represented in this church, and it would be another sermon for me to explain to you exactly what happens.

There's some really strange ideas, and I don't want to go into them right now, but listen, you can have assurance. If you have a relationship with Jesus, know your sins are forgiven, you can have an assurance that when you die, you will receive eternal life.

[9 : 33] The Apostle John, writing in his first epistle at the end of the Bible, says that, these things, meaning these things I have written, these things I have written, said John, are written that you may know that you may have eternal life.

Not that you may keep your fingers crossed and wildly hope that you might have a place in heaven, but that you may know. Friend, if you have no assurance that you will go to heaven when you die, I want to reassure you that if you trust Jesus Christ, you will be accepted into heaven.

That's the amazing thing about grace. It's God's gifting to us, even though we don't necessarily deserve it. The second thing about gifts is that they can be natural gifts.

Some of you are great musicians. Some of you, no doubt, were great sportsmen. Looking at you a few years ago now, let's admit it.

A lot of you are great hosts and hostesses. A lot of you have a lot of natural gifts. Are those natural gifts, spiritual gifts? Well, they are when you hallow those gifts to serving Jesus through them.

[10 : 53] When I was a young fellow and trying to witness to my non-Christian friends up in the north of England, it amazed me how often they would say Christianity, I can't use the word that they actually describe, but basically it means Christianity is for wimps.

Fellows up north believed then that nobody who was a man, a real man, would ever give their life to Jesus Christ. They talk about crutches. Well, I can tell you there are times in your life when you'd be

very grateful for a crutch.

And now I see the embodiment of kind of 1970s macho man, our premiership footballers. How many of them are people of faith? I mean, I have no idea whether that's genuine faith. I have no idea what it would be like to be a Christian and earn 350 grand a week.

Though I wouldn't mind the opportunity of trying to find out. Look, here's the thing. God has given you these spiritual gifts.

[12:11] They may be natural gifts. I had a man in a congregation in which I worked who was a very good pianist and purely before he became a Christian played it for his own enjoyment and for the entertainment of others.

There's nothing he loved more than applause. I don't want to say there's anything wrong with that but when he became a Christian he hallowed this gift to God. He offered it to God and said, use me. Funnily enough, he became a bishop in the Church of England and did a wonderful evening of testimony where he played music throughout the whole of his life.

He was actually a trained concert pianist and it was a very, very poignant evening for him to play his music but talk about the way he had become a Christian.

We have music from the Beatles and we have music from Rachmaninoff, whoever he was. So it could be a natural gift.

[13:23] The most important thing is you need to discover what your spiritual gifts are. And a lot of Christians are very frustrated with their walk with God because they don't know what their spiritual gifting is.

Some of you will be very frustrated. Some of you will be here because church going is actually a Sunday habit for you rather than you come to the reality of the risen Christ who died for you and forgave your sins and you want to come like those wise men of old and worship him.

I made a comment at the beginning of the service about singing carols. I should never have said that. We haven't come here to sing songs. If you want to do that, you can go down to the football. We've come here to worship the living God. Someone say amen. Someone say hallelujah. Hallelujah.

And look, these spiritual gifts have three primary directions. Firstly, our spiritual gifts are given that we might glorify God ourselves.

[14:50] that we might bring honor to him through the exercise of those spiritual gifts. The thing about spiritual gifts is they are never about drawing attention to yourself.

I've been in a load of churches in my life. That was my ministry in a way. Every week, a different church. And I have to say, I veered on the edge of being a little judgmental when I saw some people in the music group who it seemed to be more about them than it did seem to be about God.

No, spiritual gifts are given to glorify God, to bring honor to him. Secondly, to edify the church. I want you to imagine for a moment, and it would take imagination, that we were in churches where people who undertook ministries were gifted to undertake those ministries.

I want to say, I think this is, in my view, I would give Christchurch a pretty good score on that. I think we have people who undertake ministries who are really gifted to take them.

I thank God for our youth work and for our work with children. I thank God for my colleague minister, who I think attempts week by week to preach the living word to you.

[16:24] I'm grateful for those who have the gift of hosting and provide us with coffee and all that. I'm very grateful for that. And I think as a church, we might score well, were there ever to be a competition, and there never will be.

The third reason God has given us two spiritual gifts, one is to glorify himself, two is to serve the church, that the church might be what the church is meant to be.

And the third thing is that some of those gifts need to be given to serve the world. when I look around our town, I think we have a huge assignment.

And the huge assignment is how are we going to re-evangelize this town? And I want people who are gifted in evangelism to play their part in that.

Billy Graham once said that we don't all have the gift of evangelism, so most of you can relax. But he did say we're all called to be witnesses.

[17:49] That is, to take responsibility in your walk with God that some people will make their minds up about God on the basis of what they see in your life.

Can you imagine that? Can you imagine if you took that responsibility seriously how the world would be a different place? But I want Christians with gifts of leadership to get in prominent positions in commerce and in charities and in organisations that the church, that the world might be served better.

God has promised these gifts and right now don't let the devil or your sense of low self-esteem start to say to you, oh, he couldn't use me.

Oh, poor little me. I'm too old. I'm too young. You know, it's interesting, isn't it, that many of those great prophets of old, when God called them to a life of prophecy, what was their first response? Jeremiah, Jeremiah, I'm too young. God said, and here I paraphrase the Bible, God said to Jeremiah, get over it. When God called Moses, Moses said, you know what, I'm not a great leader, I don't want to do this.

[19 : 13] So God gave him Aaron, who admittedly was a mixed blessing, but nevertheless they got through. When God called Ezekiel, Ezekiel said, I'm a man of unclean lips.

And God metaphorically touched his lips with burning coal and set him free to do his weird stuff. love. So, you have these gifts if you're a believer.

And the great shame is the shame of an unopened gift. Of a gift that you may have that you choose not to offer.

father. And you sit in church week by week with a faith in your heart wondering, why is my walk with God not more stimulating?

[20 : 23] Why is it not more exciting? How many gifts do you have? Well, I can't answer that for each one of you individually.

And I do want to say when I tell you this, I did not go to Mount Sinai and come down with this. But in my experience, most people have three primary spiritual gift areas.

I once sat with a group of mega church leaders in the USA. Goodness knows how a minnow like me ended up with them. And the purpose of the day with these great leaders, people like Rick Warren and Bill Hybels and Stuart Briscoe, the purpose of the day was for us to have an honest discussion with each other and tell each other in the end of the day what did we think each other's spiritual gifts would be.

It started out that we filled in this kind of matrix of questions and we filled that in and then they were distributed and then we prayed for an hour. It was an amazing day.

thing. And at the end of it I was told very clearly what my three primary gift areas were. It completely reshaped the way I thought about my ministry.

[21 : 43] And I think if you knew what your spiritual gifts were, it would reshape your life and your walk with God. So I would say most people have three spiritual gifts and then you come across these people who have far more than three spiritual gifts and you pray for the grace from God not to hate them.

and they are world changes. So how will I know my gifts?

That's a great question and here I have to say there is a major problem which besets us human beings. And the problem is what psychologists call delusion.

That we can think we're really good at stuff that nobody else on planet earth thinks we are good at.

And that's why it's really important I think that we need to check out with people who spiritual counsel we respect and who love us enough to tell us the truth.

We need to check out whether or not our inclination that we are a future opera star or whatever has actually got any basis in reality.

[23 : 23] Maybe a talk with a minister from the church maybe and this is a great way of discovering your spiritual gifts join a home group. A home group which is small enough for you to build relationships of honesty and integrity with one another where there can be an exchange of feedback which is vital in helping us discover our spiritual gifts.

gifts. And if like me you're a senior I just want to say one thing to you in relation to this issue of spiritual gifts.

God is not finished with you yet. God is not finished with you yet. Go home stand in front of a mirror say to God you're not finished with me yet.

There's this thing in churches isn't there the 80-20 thing. You know 80% of the people sit there passively sometimes aggressively week in week out who haven't got a clue what their ministry is.

And then on the other side of the church there are ministers with the Colgate ring of confidence around their necks who think that their job is to get you to help them with their ministry whereas I have always thought that my job was to help you with your ministry to discover it and to offer it.
[25 : 00] Imagine a church where ministries were undertaken by people who were gifted to undertake them. Cherish the church where the ministers understand that their ministry is in part to help you discover your ministry.

All right well you're sitting there and you say well what will this do for me? You know I'm already I've already got enough to do you know I got my daytime television I got you know mindless stuff to watch and do.

Listen if you set yourself to discover your spiritual gifts and you offer them. You will have a renewed sense of fulfillment you will have a new excitement in your faith and you will have a new impact with the ministries of this church.

We stand at the threshold of a new year. a year which is full of anxieties and worries.

I hesitate to say that I've read anybody who can tell you what the end of 2025 is going to look like in the world in our local in our country in our local community.

[26 : 30] Nobody it seems can work out what is going to happen. Whilst we kind of worry about the way the world is going, whilst we worry about that, I want to say to you, I think that in the whole of my ministry I've never felt that the opportunity for the gospel is greater than it is now.

There are amazing things happening in our culture which maybe many of you are unaware of. The death of the new atheist movement, very well charted now in social media and in serious academic circles.

else. I've never felt that opportunity more and I want to give myself afresh to it. And I wonder who amongst you will join me?

Who of you on this first Sunday of 2025 will say I'm going to get serious about my spiritual gifting.

For those of you who don't know what it is you need to say I'm going to discover what those gifts are. They're not all spooky things. If you turn in your Bible when you get home turn to 1 Corinthians chapter 12 this is an amazing passage of scripture.

[28 : 15] You get the same kind of thing in Romans chapter 12. It's as if the Holy Spirit made it easy for us by saying you've got to remember chapter 12. Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good.

Amen. To one is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit.

It goes on. Some of those gifts are going to spook some of you and it may well be that some of the gifts that spook you today will be your gift tomorrow. I don't know about you but the first time I heard anybody speak in tongues I'm like show me the door.

I got a little impatient with prophecy where basically the strap line of the prophecy was God says you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.

I compared it to those prophecies of old where people like Ezekiel had to say to the people of God the glory of the Lord has departed from your temple.

[29 : 30] I don't think prophecy is about just saying what we want to hear. It's about saying what we don't want to hear. when I was a young minister family services were just coming onto the agenda for churches.

Because I was young it was assumed that I would be great at family services. And so I tried to teach myself a few skills to do that.

I mean I love the way in this church Ross could use his magic gifts to occupy I mean not just children I love them but you know good thing to do. And make a great kind of teaching point out of that.

But one of the things I devised it was actually a stolen idea and I stole it from the guy who was at St. George's in Leeds. And to make the point about the importance of you knowing your gifts and offering them I made a giant jigsaw.

I get the kids to come up and help me put the pieces together. What the kids didn't know was there was a piece missing right in the center of the jigsaw.

[30 : 53] At the end of it I had the kids hunting around the church for the missing piece. I had it hidden under the altar cloth on the Lord's table.

And at the end of it to make myself a hero I pulled out the piece and I put it there. My message was this. If you don't know your spiritual gifts, if you don't like those wise men of old come and offer them, sadly the church is always going to have a missing piece in the jigsaw of its ministry. who, who will bring their gifts and offer them? The wise men followed the star and the wise today will follow that same star and discover that same Christ child and discover a new way of living through him and in him.

The wise men came, they opened their treasures and they offered their gifts. In the end, it's down to you.

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the people who agreed, said together, Amen. they get out